

Butte Historic District
Bounded by Copper, Arizona,
Mercury & Continental Streets
Butte, Montana
Silver Bow County

HAER No. MT-35

HAER
MONT,
47-BUT,
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
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HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

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Date: Earliest structures date from ca. 1875 to 1879. A second building boom occurred in the 1890s, the third, and final, about 1906. There are also a number of more recent buildings.

Location: Most historic structures are in the central business district, bounded on the north by the Anaconda mining operations, on the south by the rail yards near Mercury Street, and by Arizona and Continental Streets.

Designed by: Various builders and architects.

Owner: A variety of public and private interests.

Significance: As early as 1864, Butte prospered from gold mining. Yet, as was the case in many western mining settlements, Butte's first residents built as few structures as possible, as quickly as possible. These rugged individuals were interested in what lay in Butte's soil, not on its surface. By late 1867, the 180-acre townsite had been platted and there were centers of activity along Main Street with scattered commercial and residential activity along Quartz, Copper, Park, and Broadway. In the late 1860s, gold mining declined, and there are no structures from the gold mining era left in the central business district. The single legacy of the era is the location of the central business district.

Butte's declining fortunes were reversed in 1874 when silver was discovered. Throughout the next year an estimated 300 new miners arrived in Butte, and the few hotels and boarding houses quickly became overcrowded. There was an immediate surge of new construction to house the influx of fortune seekers. Butte's earliest extant structures date from this period of prosperity. Scattered throughout the business district are two-story brick buildings of similar size, plan, and window and door arrangement, which housed the mostly single male population. A few other brick and woodframe structures built mostly for retail and mixed uses also survive.

Between 1874 and 1879, silver mining, new technology, and the development of an urban character quickly brought Butte to maturity. The first successful local ore smelting was a major industrial advancement that altered the physical and economic complexion of the growing city. Smelters belched a

sulfurous smoke that killed vegetation in the area, yet their presence was an investment necessity that saved time and money. Previously, ore had been shipped to the East coast or to Swansea, Wales, for processing, a time-consuming and expensive proposition. With the incorporation of the city, a regularly published newspaper, accelerated property values, and the construction of 15 substantial brick buildings, Butte's permanence was assured. Within 5 years the log cabin mining settlement had become the largest and most prosperous city in Montana.

During the 5 years of rapid expansion and well into the 1880s, Irish and English immigrants settled in Butte. Attracted by the prospect of steady work and wealth, experienced miners left deteriorating tin mines in their native Cornwall, England, to settle close to the mines in the local communities of Centerville and Walkerville. These communities of single men directly affected the services that developed in Butte and the buildings that housed them. Scattered throughout the central business district today are 2-story brick buildings built to accomodate this population of single miners. These buildings are essentially the same with similar floor plans, window and door arrangements. To satisfy growing markets, a variety of wood frame and brick buildings were constructed for mixed uses.

Butte's burgeoning industrial and commercial development was accelerated in 1881 with the completion of the Utah Northern Railway, which linked Ogden, Utah, and Butte. The railroad allowed easier access to equipment and supplies and facilitated the shipment of ore throughout the country. Rail transportation became particularly important after 1883 when large copper deposits were discovered at the Anaconda mine in Butte. This significant discovery would eventually change Butte from a mining camp to a more stable, industrialized city. The rapid success and promise of new industrial inventions introduced at the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, including the first electric motor generators and hand drawn wire and arc lighting, dramatically increased the national demand for copper.

Butte's gold and silver industries had already established a framework for mining and easily facilitated the rapid prosperity that copper mining brought. By 1890, Butte's affluence was well marked by the construction of a second generation of buildings. New boarding houses such as the Hamilton Block, the Curtis Music Hall, and the Stephens' Block were more spacious and refined than earlier housing.

Several of the new structures on East Galena and Mercury Streets housed Butte's growing population of prostitutes, a clear sign of a community of single male miners. The more sophisticated "parlor houses" on Mercury Street between Main and Wyoming catered to an affluent clientele, while working class miners frequented the "cribs" on East Galena.. Prostitutes also generated commercial enterprises. Maria Paumie relocated her dyeing and cleaning services one block from the red-light district to capitalize on the special needs of women "on the line," and saloons and gambling houses lined both sides of South Main Street between Park and Galena Streets.

The prospect of employment that accompanied the 1874 silver discovery encouraged many Chinese living in Rocker, a mining camp on the outskirts of Butte, to move into town. Mine operators solicited Chinese laborers to cut wood for timbering the silver mines. The Chinese community developed in the heart of the central business district on South Main and to the west on Galena and Mercury Streets. By 1890, the two city blocks between Main and Montana Streets were densely populated by Chinese, virtually creating a closed community of paved alleys, which served as main thoroughfares for the residents and shopkeepers.

Much of Butte's Uptown commercial development was directly attributable to its Jewish immigrants. As early as 1876, a small group of Jewish merchants were supplying goods and services to local residents as clerks, tailors, jewelers, grocers, barbers, and clothing merchants. Over the years, many Jewish merchants attained prominent positions in the community. Henry Jacobs, one of the first merchants in Butte, was elected as the first mayor in 1876. Two early clothing stores, Sans & Boyce and Gans & Klein, were founded by prominent Jewish citizens. Gans & Klein, located for many years on Main Street between Granite and Broadway, also opened branch stores in other Montana cities.

The success of these commercial establishments and the buildings that housed them were clear manifestations of Butte's prosperity during the 1890s, and commercial development continued to prosper as stability and confidence in the copper industry grew. An influx of eastern and foreign capital and the consolidation of mining companies directly influenced and supported Butte's economic well-being. In 1899, the New York based Standard Oil acquired the local Anaconda Copper Company and other smaller mining concerns to form a gigantic holding company, the Amalgamated Copper Mining Company. This financial activity lent support to new construction, and, although

the third generation building boom did not occur until around 1906, several substantial buildings were constructed about the turn of the century. When Sutton's New Grand Theatre opened on September 10, 1901, it was advertised as the largest and most elegant theatre in the West with a seating capacity of 2,175. Butte, with a population of 30,000, had become an important cultural center and the most famous acts in vaudeville, opera, and theater often played there. Butte's first skyscraper gave the city a distinctive urban character. Built in 1901 for the French-Canadian land speculator, Emanuel Hirbour, the Hirbour Block is an eight-story steel-frame brick and stone structure, which has been continuously used for office space.

Despite Butte's prosperity, the years between 1899 and 1906 were marked by conflicts over mining rights, which in turn created turmoil in employment and ultimately affected the construction trade and other commercial activity. A 1903 shutdown by Amalgamated affected 80% of the wage earners in the State, and an article in the Anaconda Standard indicated that never before had there been such an unfavorable outlook for construction in Butte.

By 1906 the legal disputes had been resolved, and Butte's economy reflected a renewed confidence in the mining industry's financial stability. The consolidation of mining interests placed in the hands of local businessmen such as Miles Finlen, Rod Leggat, and John O'Rourke the capital to finance Butte's third generation building boom. With this new surge of construction, Butte's business blocks assumed a new scale and variety. Small two-story commercial buildings with cast-iron storefronts were suddenly joined by more monumental structures, such as the eight-story Metals Bank Building designed by the New York architect Cass Gilbert. The skyscrapers gave Butte a distinctive urban quality lacking in other Western mining cities. The new building also reflected a broadening of public and private services characteristic of an urban settlement. Public buildings such as the Silver Bow County Courthouse and the Silver Bow County Jail assumed grander scale and finer detail.

When local businessmen invested in Butte in 1906, they were not merely building to accomodate a growing population or growing markets as was the case in earlier periods of expansion. Immigrants who had made their fortunes in the mining industry were looking to the cultural traditions of the east to imitate and adopt. They were building with a vision toward a rich, thriving mercantile city. Unlike earlier building periods where function dictated a certain

form that was repeated in many buildings, this period of prosperity allowed for greater diversity and a kind of opulence of form and design that was translated to smaller business establishments.

The commercial and residential areas around the central business district were also developing rapidly during the early decades of the twentieth century. Butte's substantial Chinese, Cornish, and Irish populations were joined by a bustling Italian settlement east of Uptown at Meaderville, a Finnish district on East Broadway, and a mixture of Croatians, Slavs, Italians, and English in McQueen, east of Meaderville. From these pockets of ethnic diversity sprang neighborhood commercial and community activities including schools, churches, lodges, stores, saloons, and boarding houses. Although many of these establishments were outside the Uptown area, they did not impinge on its significance nor did they diminish the significance of activities centered there. Main and Park Streets remained the principal corridors for public celebrations, demonstrations, and meetings.

It is interesting to note that, although the copper industry was prospering during the early twentieth century, the corporate enterprise had little interest in other commercial developments in Butte. In 1910, Amalgamated merged with subsidiaries to become the Anaconda Copper Mining Company. Policy decisions were still controlled from New York, although no longer by Standard Oil; and, except for a hardware store, the Anaconda Copper Mining Company operated no commercial establishments and owned little property in the central business district. Despite local perception, Butte's commercial development was almost solely in the hands of its citizens although the presence of the mining company obviously reinforced local business commitment. An increase in the demand for copper caused by World War I instigated a new sprial of commercial prosperity.

The zenith years for the mining industry were between 1910 and 1918, and much of the success was manifested by a rise in the social and economic status of the Chinese, whose increased real estate investments and acquisitions were dramatic. Storefronts on Main Street to the east of Chinatown Alley were acquired by Chinese merchants and businessmen, and leased to tenants for meat markets, saloons, and barber shops.

The pattern of industrial-led commercial growth fell off after World War I; the drop in copper demand and price was

accompanied by a concurrent decrease in Uptown commercial growth. But by 1924 the production at Anaconda mines was up significantly and the levels held until the economy bottomed out in 1929. By 1931 copper had dropped to 5¢ per pound.

Throughout the Depression, the exodus of citizens who had depended on mining for livelihood sapped commercial activities and a general strike against Anaconda lasting several months in 1935 increased the bread lines. Boarding houses, hotels, grocery stores, meat markets, hardware stores, and restaurants closed, and residential areas suffered a similar decline. The Chinese were hit especially hard because it was against them that tax laws regarding delinquent payments were most strictly enforced, and much of their real estate was confiscated. Even though World War II stimulated the economy and increased the demand for copper, Butte's mines were crippled by the nationwide lack of manpower.

In 1947 the Anaconda Copper Mining Company initiated the Greater Butte Project to attract new miners to the area and to induce the existing labor force to stay. The project called for a new block-caving method for mining low-grade ore, and for 2,000 company subsidized houses for miners and their families. Ultimately, however, block-caving proved too expensive and Anaconda resorted to large-scale, open-pit mining in 1955.

The advent of open-pit mining brought drastic change to Butte's physical and economic environments. The cost saving factors characteristic of the open-pit method had an adverse affect on the work force since it requires considerably fewer people than traditional below surface methods. Open-pit mining brought about a decline and redistribution of the population. Gradually, the open-pit consumed whole neighborhoods bordering the central business district creating empty spaces and waste and tailings heaps. Concurrently, Butte's older Uptown commercial district was falling prey to suburban strip development to the south in the area called the "Flats."

Forced relocation and gradual suburban development caused an influx of residents to settle on the Flats and the rise of the automobile after World War II facilitated and escalated this growth. As suburbanization expanded beyond the central business district, different commercial ventures came into the Uptown. Gradually, from the 1940s, the structures that once housed Chinese merchandise stores, noodle parlors, rooming houses, and residences were

replaced mostly by car dealers. The fire department demolished all the structures in Chinatown below Mercury Street in 1945, and today only two Chinese commercial buildings remain to recall this once vibrant part of Butte's history: the Wah Chong Tai Company Buildings, and the Pekin Noodle Parlor.

Despite changes in the Chinatown section of Uptown, the rest of the commercial structures in the central business district remain largely intact. Commercial buildings that housed Butte's businesses were a barometer of activity in the mining industry. The buildings that remain in Uptown Butte represent the vicissitudes of the industry and evidence the city's growth. Given the role that the mining industry has played in Butte's history, it is essential to place that role in perspective to determine how it effects Butte's current situation and what new factors have or may supplant its influence in the future.

Historian: Isabel Hill, 1979

Transmitted by: Monica E. Hawley, Historian, 1984

ADDENDUM TO
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All color xeroxes were made from a duplicate color transparency.

Photographer: Jet Lowe, 1979.

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| MT-35-81 (CT) | DETAIL OF THE UPPER STORY OF THE BUTTE FLORAL CO. |
| MT-35-82 (CT) | SIGN PAINTED ON THE SIDE OF A BUILDING; LUTHEY'S WAS ONE OF BUTTE'S MAJOR GROCERS IN THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY. THE FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH IS VISIBLE IN THE BACKGROUND. |
| MT-35-83 (CT) | DETAIL OF A COMMERCIAL SIGN PAINTED ON THE SIDE OF A BUILDING. |
| MT-35-84 (CT) | FRONT FACADE OF THE CURTIS MUSIC HALL |
| MT-35-85 (CT) | HENNESSY'S DEPARTMENT STORE (130 NORTH MAIN, 1897-1898) IS A STEEL FRAME AND BRICK STRUCTURE DESIGNED BY FREDERICK KEES OF MINNEAPOLIS. IT HAS INLAID MARBLE TILES IN THE HALLS, AND PLATE GLASS WINDOWS FRAMED IN COPPER ON THE FIRST AND SECOND FLOORS. THERE IS ALSO A CAST-IRON AND ORNAMENTAL GLASS LOWER LEVEL AND TERRA-COTTA DETAILING AROUND THE WINDOWS. THE ENTRANCE IS AN ELLIPTICAL ARCH WITH IRON GRILL WORK. |
| MT-35-86 (CT) | WEST FACADE OF THE BERTOGLIO STORAGE AND APPLIANCE CO. AN EXPOSURE SEAM AND DIFFERING LINES TO THE HIP ROOF INDICATE THAT THE SOUTHERN PORTION OF THE BUILDING IS A LATER ADDITION. |